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THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF SACRED LITERATURE

THE BOOK OF REVELATION AN OUTLINE BIBLE-STUDY COURSE

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STUDY II

III. VISIONS OF HEAVEN

First day.—§ 14. *Heavenly glory of God.* Read 4:1-4. Having previously admonished the principal churches of Asia Minor to purify themselves in preparation for the speedy coming of Christ (§§ 6-12), John now proceeds to assure his readers that God and Christ together will presently execute a mighty judgment upon the Roman Empire, at the same time destroying Satan and all his hosts. John's method of encouraging his readers to expect this glorious deliverance is to paint vivid pictures of coming events as he has beheld them in the ecstasy of vision. First, he describes the majesty of God in heaven. God is represented as sitting upon a throne, and his appearance is more beautiful than that of a rainbow ornamented with precious stones. He is surrounded by twenty-four royal subordinates, also seated upon thrones and wearing golden crowns. This imagery is well calculated to persuade the reader that God and his heavenly associates represent an imperial authority vastly more powerful than that of the Romans.

Second day.—Read 4:5-8 for further details in the picture of God's heavenly glory. The terribleness of God is suggested by the lightnings, voices, and thunders that proceed from his throne. Seven spirits stand ready to do his bidding, and the presence of four monstrous creatures adds to the terrors of the scene. These indescribable beings perpetually declare the eternal holiness and power of God "who is and who is to come."

Third day.—Read 4:9-11. The twenty-four heavenly kings also acknowledge the supremacy and illimitable power of God. In contrast with the Roman emperor, who sets himself up as the deity demanding worship from men, these princes prostrate themselves before the God of heaven. Since he has created all things, he is lord of all and is the only rightful possessor of glory, honor, and power.

This must have been an exceedingly comforting thought to Christians enduring persecution, because they refused to worship the emperor whose glory, honor, and power seemed temporarily so overwhelming.

Fourth day.—§ 15. *Heavenly glory of Christ.* Read 5:1-5. As a further means of strengthening the confidence of his readers, in the next place John pictures the heavenly dignity of Christ, whose speedy return is to bring deliverance for Christians. God is represented as holding in his hand a wonderful book-roll, so constructed that it could not be completely unrolled until each of its seven seals had been broken. The contents of the book are unknown because God awaited the appearing of someone able to break the magic seals. In his vision the seer weeps at his inability to peer into this roll containing the secrets of the future, but presently he is comforted with the assurance that the risen Christ possesses the power necessary to break the seals, thereby revealing the future to John who communicates this new information to his readers.

Fifth day.—Read 5:6-10. Christ's appearing upon the scene is the occasion for introducing special details in the picture of heaven. Standing in the midst of the royal court, he is portrayed as a marvelous creature resembling a lamb. When he takes the magic book out of God's hand the dignitaries of heaven do obeisance to him in recognition of his power, even as they had previously acknowledged the power of God (4:9-11). Christ is thus honored because of his faithfulness while on earth, and there remains upon earth a group of his followers whom he has destined for a royal rule, notwithstanding their present condition of affliction.

Sixth day.—Read 5:11-14. The author cannot dismiss his description of the heavenly powers without a concluding declaration that the might of God and of Christ is sure to triumph. The entire angelic host joins the members of the royal court in heralding the praises of Christ who is worthy to receive all power and glory, in spite of the fact that his earthly career had ended in death at the hands of the Romans. In the final outburst of praise the whole creation unites to acknowledge the complete and eternal supremacy of God and Christ together. As John held this portrait of the heavenly powers before the eyes of his fellow-sufferers, doubtless many of them were induced to share his confidence in the speedy overthrow of hostile Roman rule.

IV. VISIONS FROM THE HEAVENLY BOOK

Seventh day.—§ 16. *Pictures of impending calamities.* Read 6:1, 2. In his vision John had been privileged to peer into the secrets of heaven. As one by one the seven seals of the heavenly book were broken, he saw as in a great picture book images of events to take place in the future when the end of the present world draws near. The first picture seen is that of a white horse and its crowned rider equipped with a bow and accoutered for victory—symbolic of impending wars to presage the downfall of the Roman Empire. Probably John has in mind a possible invasion of the Parthians, or other dreaded enemies from the East, who would throw themselves furiously against Rome, their temporary triumph being prophetic of the ultimate destruction of the empire by Christ.

Eighth day.—Read 6:3, 4. The breaking of the second seal discloses another picture of coming disaster. The rider upon a red horse is a still more vivid symbol of the wars which are expected to rend the empire. This is a scene of bloodshed

typified by the sword as the characteristic weapon of destruction in ancient times. Peace would be removed from the earth and wholesale slaughter would ensue. Then the Romans themselves would suffer the same agonies which they at present were inflicting upon the Christians.

Ninth day.—Read 6:5, 6. The picture revealed with the breaking of the third seal symbolizes famine, another of the preliminary distresses to overtake the Romans as the end draws near. The rider upon the black horse carries a pair of scales for weighing out bread when food will become so scarce in the empire that one measure of wheat—the usual amount of the workingman's daily ration—will increase twelve times its normal price; even the price of coarser barley bread will similarly increase. But the luxuries, oil and wine, will be unharmed, thereby permitting the wealthy to revel in their pleasures, while the more substantial staple articles of food perish.

Tenth day.—Read 6:7, 8. Still another image of approaching doom is disclosed when the fourth seal is broken. This time the color of the horse resembles that of a corpse, and its rider is the personification of death accompanied by a personification of the powers of the lower world. These destructive powers, having been let loose upon the Roman Empire, will employ various devices for accomplishing the death of one quarter of the population. Many persons will fall in battle, others will die of hunger, deadly pestilence will carry away others, and still others will be devoured by ferocious beasts.

Eleventh day.—Read 6:9-11. In speaking of death, John is reminded that Christians, who have already been overtaken by this calamity, are to suffer further persecutions. But the opening of the fifth seal exhibits a comforting picture for the persecuted. The Christian martyrs have not been carried off to Hades. On the contrary, their souls are seen stored in a special place in heaven where they cry to God for vengeance upon their Roman persecutors. The seer learns that the period of suffering is to continue "yet for a little time," until others of the faithful have been given a full opportunity to attain to the glories of martyrdom. Looking upon this picture of the reward awaiting them in heaven, Christians were encouraged to endure with equanimity their part in the calamities of those trying days.

Twelfth day.—Read 6:12-17. The next picture exhibits certain terrors in nature to occur with the approach of the world's end. Here John follows in the footsteps of his Jewish and Christian predecessors, who drew their imagery from terrifying natural phenomena. See Isa. 2:10 f., 19, 21; Joel 2:30 f.; Mark 13:24 f. The day of final agony is portrayed in terms of the complete collapse of the present powers of nature, thus surely involving the utter downfall of the Roman Empire. In those ancient days the sky was thought to be a bell-shaped partition shutting off heaven from earth. When this partition is removed men are filled with terror at seeing God looking directly down upon them, and they seek to hide themselves in the caves of the earth. The terrified persons who stand out especially in John's vision are the characteristic classes of Roman society: kings, princes, military officers, the rich, the powerful, slaves, and freemen.

Thirteenth day.—§ 17. *Safety of the saints.* Read 7:1-8. Following the portrayal of dire calamities, another picture appears, guaranteeing the safety of

the saints. Adhering to the current notion that the winds are controlled by special supernatural powers, John pictures four angels restraining the fury of the winds, while another angel in this season of calm places the stamp of God upon the foreheads of the saints. The first group is to be selected from the twelve tribes of the children of Israel, 12,000 from each tribe. These are to survive the calamities of the age and be given a place of final refuge in heaven.

Fourteenth day.—Read 7:9-12. The rescue of 144,000 saints from among the Jews represents but a part of the total number to be saved. In the same picture John sees an innumerable multitude rescued from among Gentiles of every nationality. Clothed in white robes and carrying palms in their hands, this company of the redeemed are portrayed in the act of rendering praise to God and to Christ for effecting their salvation. The angels join in the chorus making special declaration of the almighty glory and power of God, who is the ultimate source of salvation. The readers of the book, as they gaze upon this picture, would surely gather new strength for resisting the tortures of persecution.

Fifteenth day.—Read 7:13-17. Not content with the assuring imagery already exhibited, John sketches a further scene revealing more explicitly the identity of the white-robed saints in his picture. One of the heavenly dignitaries definitely announces that these persons are the faithful, who have passed successfully through the period of excessive suffering immediately to precede the destruction of the Roman Empire and the end of the world, which have been described in chap. 6. The privileges of these saints in heaven are portrayed in glowing imagery. They dwell in the very presence of God, receiving constantly his protection, and Christ devotes himself especially to their care.

Sixteenth day.—Read 8:1-5. The breaking of the seventh and last seal of the heavenly book discloses more in detail the tragic events connected with the last times. But before proceeding to the description of these terrors, John has still another word of assurance for the faithful. While the hosts of heaven await in awful silence for half an hour the staging of the final scene in the great drama of destruction, an angel appears with a golden vessel full of incense symbolizing the prayers of the saints. Heaven is represented as equipped with altars for sacrifice, as was the temple inclosure in Jerusalem. When the incense is burned the prayers of the saints ascend in pleasing fragrance before God. In contrast with this evidence of divine favor for afflicted Christians, another act of the angel is expressive of divine wrath upon the enemies of Christians. When the angel is seen taking fire from the altar and casting it upon the earth the silence of heaven is broken by thunders, voices, lightnings, and the rumble of the earthquake. Thus the enactment of the final scene is begun.

V. VISIONS OF THE SEVEN ANGELS WITH TRUMPETS

Seventeenth day.—§ 18. *Preliminary afflictions.* Read 8:6, 7. When the last seal of the heavenly book was removed, John saw seven angels with trumpets (8:2). Now they are seen prepared to give the signal for successive deeds of destruction to be visited upon mortals. With the blowing of the first trumpet a preliminary affliction falls upon earth in the form of a destructive hailstorm accompanied by livid flashes of blood-red lightning. So severe is this storm that one-third of all the trees are destroyed along with all green grass.

Eighteenth day.—Read 8:8, 9. When the second angel gives his signal new afflictions are seen to smite the earth. An uprooted volcano is cast into the sea, and its bloody flames not only kill a third part of all creatures living in the sea, but also destroy one-third of the shipping of the world. As the wealth and happiness of Rome were largely dependent upon the commerce of the Mediterranean, this event would constitute a serious blow to the power of the empire.

Nineteenth day.—Read 8:10, 11. At a signal from the third angel one-third of all rivers and springs are smitten by a falling star which renders the waters both bitter and poisonous. As a result of drinking these poisoned waters, many human beings perish.

Twentieth day.—Read 8:12, 13. The last of these milder forms of affliction occurs when the fourth angel blows his trumpet. Thereupon the luminaries of both day and night are diminished by one-third. But much greater distresses are to follow in three successive seasons of woe. John sees the picture of a flying eagle possessing powers of speech and announcing that each of the remaining three angelic trumpeters will call forth demonstrations of more woeful afflictions as the climax of the scene is reached.

Twenty-first day.—§ 19. *The first woe.* Read 9:1-6. At the blowing of the fifth trumpet, a star falls to the earth. It was a custom among the ancients to personify the stars. This supernatural astral being possesses the key to the great chasm beneath the earth where all sorts of terrors are supposed to be located. When this awful chasm is unlocked John sees the atmosphere filled with black smoke. This smoke breeds pestilential creatures resembling locusts or scorpions. But these new pests, instead of destroying vegetation as locusts usually do, direct their harmful activities toward human beings. But Christians were to have no fear, since the locusts were definitely instructed to spare all persons marked by the seal of God (7:3). All others were to be smitten, not by death, lest they escape their fate too quickly, but by sore affliction for a period of five months.

Twenty-second day.—Read 9:7-12. In order to increase the picture of terror John adds a fanciful description of the creatures that have been released from the abyss. They are horse-shaped creatures having human heads, long hair, and lions' teeth. Their bodies are covered with scales like breastplates, and they fly with wings that make a terrific noise. Their serpent-like tails containing stings at the end are the instruments with which they torture mortals. This destructive host is led by a superior demon, himself the very personification of destruction. Such mythological figures were not unusual in the thinking of that ancient world.

Twenty-third day.—§ 20. *The second woe.* Read 9:13-17. Especial preparations have been made for the loosing of the third woe as depicted by John. The sixth trumpeting angel was instructed to liberate four angels who had been chained down near the river Euphrates. Here they had been kept in waiting for the moment when they were to assemble a mighty host of cavalry 200,000,000 strong to overrun the Roman Empire. Nor are these mere ordinary horsemen. They are to be equipped with breastplates flashing like fire and are to ride upon horses having lions' heads and exhaling fire, smoke, and brimstone.

Twenty-fourth day.—Read 9:18-21. It was to be expected that so terrible a scourge would prove very deadly. As a result, one-third of the earth's inhabitants die, slain by the fire, smoke, and brimstone exhaled by the horses. The

horses all have serpent-like tails with which they injure men. This terrifying demonstration seems to have been designed to effect the repentance of surviving Gentiles, who should see in this affliction a punishment for their previous refusal to adopt Christianity. But John does not look for any general repentance even under these circumstances. He expects the heathen peoples of the Roman Empire to continue until the end in their idolatrous and sinful ways.

Twenty-fifth day.—Read 10:1-7. Before passing on to describe the last woe, John introduces a few supplementary pictures sketching more fully certain details of the program. In the first place, he reaffirms his authority to depict these details by describing at this point a new experience of his own. He seems to be back upon earth again where he witnesses the descent of a mighty angel who stands with one foot upon the sea and the other upon the dry land. The utterance of the angel stirs up the voice of the thunders, here represented as supernatural persons using intelligible speech. Apparently their words referred to approaching doom, but John did not feel at liberty to repeat their language. That these secrets are presently to be disclosed is solemnly affirmed by the angel, but this revelation is not to be made until the seventh trumpet is blown. Then the events of the end will be revealed, disclosing to the righteous the mystery of God as already foreshadowed in the writings of the prophets.

Twenty-sixth day.—Read 10:8-11. John believes that he is the divinely chosen medium of this final revelation. He supports this contention by relating that in his vision he had received and eaten a book from the angel's hand. This reception of divine wisdom was a pleasant experience; the book was like honey in John's mouth. But it grew less pleasing as he reflected upon the sufferings to be endured by the Christians in the last days. Nevertheless, he now feels himself fully equipped to disclose the particulars regarding the final judgment which God is about to pronounce upon the hostile heathen.

Twenty-seventh day.—Read 11:1 f. John lingers a few moments longer upon a picture of events to take place before the third and final woe is introduced by the blowing of the seventh trumpet. He has been instructed in his vision to take the measurements of the Jerusalem temple with the altar and inner court, but not to measure the outer court to which Gentiles were usually admitted. In the new scheme of things no provision is to be made for Gentiles, since all those who have not accepted Christianity will have perished. But the measurements of the more sacred precincts are to be preserved for future restoration. In the meantime the Gentiles will devastate the holy city for a period of three and a half years before the advent of the final woe. Apparently John took these numbers from some such source as Dan. 7:25; 12:7.

Twenty-eighth day. Read 11:3-7. Another phenomenal event of the last days seen by John in his vision is the appearance upon earth of two heavenly personages sent especially to preach with reference to the coming disaster. For a period of 1260 days—again three and a half years in ancient reckoning—they are miraculously preserved from the enmity of the heathen against whom they prophesy. Their power to prevent rain, to turn water into blood, and to smite the earth with plagues implies that John identifies these heavenly beings with Elijah and Moses, who had performed similar feats when previously upon earth (I Kings 17:1; Exod. 7:20). When their appointed task is finished they will be

slain by a monster ascending from the abyss which had previously been opened to let loose demonic powers to work evil in the last times (9:2).

Twenty-ninth day.—Read 11:8-14. Temporarily the triumph of evil seems complete. For three and a half days the bodies of the slain prophets are seen lying unburied in the streets of Jerusalem, the city where Jesus had been crucified. During this time the heathen rejoice in what they imagine to be their victory over the prophets who have spoken evil things against the pagan world. But this rejoicing is soon turned into fear as the slain witnesses suddenly come to life and ascend to heaven. Then follows a fearful earthquake causing the death of 7,000 people and striking terror into the hearts of the survivors. After a long digression John is now ready to depict the final scene to follow the blowing of the seventh trumpet. The third and last woe "cometh quickly."

Thirtieth day.—§ 21. *The third woe.* Read 11:15-19. The first picture seen after the seventh angel sounds his trumpet is a grand exhibition of triumph in which heavenly voices declare the complete and everlasting victory of Christ. The heavenly court likewise announces the final triumph of God Almighty over all heathen foes, when judgment is executed upon the nations and the saints are rewarded for their faithfulness. The heavenly temple is also exhibited, and terrible noises accompanied by a storm of hail prepare the way for final catastrophe. In the remainder of the book John produces several striking pictures, sometimes giving elaborate details of incidents to attend the ultimate establishment of God's triumph over the hostile powers under whom Christians are at present suffering.

Thirty-first day.—§ 22. *Summary.* Read rapidly through chaps. 4-11. Certain characteristics of this portion of the Book of Revelation are worthy of special note: (1) Observe that the author's pedagogical method is to teach by appealing to the imagination of his readers with pictures instead of trying to produce conviction by means of formal argument. (2) In presenting his pictures, John has a very definite end in view. By first exhibiting the heavenly majesty of God and Christ in chaps. 4 f., the afflicted readers are induced to believe that they may confidently rely upon divine help to deliver them from their troubles. Then in a further series of pictures their imagination is stimulated to anticipate a line of imminent events rapidly leading up to the final woe which will mean the complete triumph of God and the utter destruction of their enemies. (3) John sometimes draws imagery for the details of his pictures from the Old Testament and later Jewish apocalypses, such as the Book of Enoch, which abounds in descriptions of angels and other heavenly scenery. (4) John's own frame of mind is that of the religious enthusiast who is able to fuse existing imagery with the new creations of his own genius, as he endeavors to portray the future anew in the light of recent events brought on by the persecution of the Christians at the hands of the Romans.

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. Describe the vision of God and heaven with which John opens the second portion of his book.
2. Why did his visions of the future take the imagery of thrones and kings and empires?
3. Name such qualities of God represented in these pictures as would be particularly comforting to the first readers of this book.

4. What office in the picture of heaven does John ascribe to Christ, and how does his figure reflect the Judaistic sacrificial system?
5. What was probably the result of these triumphant visions upon the early Christians?
6. Have they a message also for us? If so, what is it?
7. Through what figures does John present the calamities which he believes must come before the Roman government can be overthrown?
8. How is nature to assist in the final downfall of the persecutors of the Christians?
9. What conception of the physical relation of earth and heaven underlies this picture of earthly destruction?
10. Where meanwhile were the Christians, who had already suffered martyrdom, supposed to be?
11. How was the safety of those Christians, who were yet living on the earth, to be assured?
12. Why do vss. 13 to 18 of chap. 7 convey comfort to all suffering Christians as well as to those for whom the book was written?
13. With what reassuring picture does the author introduce the visions of destruction represented by the angels with the trumpets?
14. What was accomplished by the first five angels?
15. What does the purpose of the sixth angel suggest as to the attitude of the Christians toward the gentile world?
16. With what vision does John seek to establish confidence in the minds of his hearers as to his authority to speak his message?
17. How does the message of the seventh angel compensate for the preceding terrors and give a happy climax?
18. Are people who are in great affliction likely to be affected more by appeals to reason or to the emotions?
19. Suppose that John had pictured the final triumphs without the disasters preceding it. What would have been the effect upon his hearers?
20. (a) Would a deeply religious man of today use such imagery as John used?
- b) If not, why not?
- c) Does our own environment furnish other means of inspiring religious confidence?
- d) Name an example.